

# 'Why did they hate us'

## The bottomless academic pyramid and a decolonial feminist agenda for higher education

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**Abstract:** *This paper historicises the concept of 'bottomless pyramid' (triângulo sin base) from its origins in Latin American anthropology in the 1960s to its current use by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui to criticise the international system of power in higher education. This theoretical legacy has the potential to foreground ongoing inequalities against the predominated, that is, people whose access to formal education is hindered by race, class, and gender. It touches on the epistemological injustice of being Othered by universities in reading the memories of Carolina Maria de Jesus. The discussion aspires to highlight the academic project's tensions as problematised by contemporary decolonial feminisms from Latin America, focusing on 'progress' as a device of power.*

**Keywords:** Bottomless academic pyramid, international system of higher Education, Carolina Maria de Jesus/Bitita, Latin American antiracist theory, decolonial feminism, academic arrogance and extractivism, ideology of progress, sociology of education

### Introducción

This essay offers a theoretical critique of the international system of higher education inspired by Latin American social thought. It probes the impact of the enclosure of (academic) knowledge on racialised and impoverished populations who are *predominated* (Jesus, 2015) within power structures. To do so, it seconds Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's (2012, 2015) proposition to use the concept of 'bottomless pyramid' to describe the relationships between universities on a global scale, accepting her suggestion about the need to demystify the ideology of progress (2018: 45).

The aim of the essay is to circulate and revitalise genealogies of thought rooted in the periphery, by recovering some of the 1960s Latin American debates about inequalities. Although formal education is not the primary focus of such debates, I argue that it is possible to rely on them to develop a decolonial research agenda for higher education, as the 'bottomless pyramid' offers a tool to articulate different segments of critical thought in sociology of education that are currently disconnected.

Although 'education' is consistently coded as beneficial and frequently used without adjectives or specifications, implying its meanings are not disputed, it is urgent to acknowledge the different shapes and effects of educational processes. The existence of *educations* (in plural) has been highlighted, amongst others, by Paulo Freire (1987, 1996). His concept of a 'banking' teaching model is influential (hooks, 2013; Silva, 2000), if not consensual (Tuck and Yang, 2012). It describes a form of education that hinders emancipation by reducing the act of learning to a passive

reception of knowledge produced elsewhere. Banking education, Freire argues, creates self-doubt and alienation.

Indeed, what are the effects of educational inequalities on people who are excluded from schooling? Which theoretical legacies can be used to foreground and criticise the effects of such exclusion? How to make sense of the national and international links of power shaping the educational system? Moreover, how can we assemble an ‘ethical compass’ to act against the structural inequalities within formal education?

To consider these questions, the first section of this text relies on Carolina Maria de Jesus’ (1997) *memoir* to foreground the gendered and racialised impact of the enclosure of (academic) knowledge. The second section historicises the concept of the ‘bottomless pyramid’ (*pirâmide sin base*) by tracing its origins to Latin American anthropological debates in the 1960s. The third section presents Rivera Cusicanqui’s contemporary use of the bottomless pyramid as a tool in higher education debates and continues her reflection by examining how the idea of ‘progress’ permeates our understanding of knowledge and education. The fourth and final section highlights the potential of the concept of bottomless academic pyramid to contemporary discussion on sociology of education and draws some political implications to our<sup>1</sup> practices within the contemporary ‘bottomless pyramid’.

## 1. ‘Why did they hate us?’: academic arrogance

*Oh! If only it were possible for me to become a doctor...*

*I would be Dr. Bitita.*

(Jesus 1997 [1986]: 40)

When talking about racialised and impoverished people like herself, Carolina Maria de Jesus (c.1914-1977) frequently employs the term *predominated*. One of the traits of the *predominated*, she highlights, is exclusion from formal education. Bitita’s *Diary* (1997) is a childhood memoir where she recollects a typical learning journey: uncertain she’d be ever able to read; yet sure of never becoming a doctor. On Jesus’s first day of school, she endured the proverbial renaming – an example of the system’s intrusive power in moulding her identity. She learned Bitita was a nickname used within the family and, therefore, unacceptable in the classroom. Dr. Bitita was an oxymoron from the start.

Growing up in rural Brazil during the 1920s, Jesus describes how written materials surrounded her childhood: the newspaper read aloud each evening by Mr Manoel Nogueira to the illiterate neighbourhood; the precarious access to medical treatments; the tab tracking the alleged debts in the grocery shop; the paper called money dividing ‘masters’ and ‘nobodies’ (Jesus, 1997: 125). Her cherished grandfather, Benedito José da Silva, attentively listened to the competing national projects on how to ‘integrate’ formerly enslaved people such as himself, acquiescing to Rui Barbosa’s project based on formal education and land distribution whilst violently forbidding his partner, Siá Maruca, to work or leave the house without his permission. In her memories, Jesus lays out the unequal social relations that shaped her life.

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<sup>1</sup> This ‘us’ emphasises my aspiration to be part of an epistemic community committed to anti-racist, feminist, and anti-imperialist practices. In the context of this essay, I thank Stephen Gaffney and Renata Kempf for their generous reading.

*There was a little black girl, Isolina, who knew how to read. She was sought after to read the [medical] prescriptions. I envied Lina! And I thought, 'Ah! I'm gonna learn how to read, too, God willing! If she's black and learned why can't I learn?'*

*I doubted my potential because the doutores from Coimbra said that blacks didn't have the ability. Could that be persecution? What harm had the blacks done to the Portuguese? Why did they hate us, if the blacks were poor and unable to compete with them in anything? That criticism gave the blacks an inferiority complex. (Jesus, 1997: 42, italics in the original)*

The 'Doutores from Coimbra' are a trope in Jesus' writings. Translating the text, Emanuelle Oliveira and Beth Joan Vinkler choose to maintain the expression in italic instead of using an English equivalent like PhD or Doctor. *Doutores* refers to the educated men with an academic degree acquired in Coimbra, the only Portuguese-language university from 1290 to 1911. In Jesus's narrative, the 'Doutores from Coimbra' have the power to establish truth despite reality. Their degrees shape the colonial streams connecting knowledge to specific class, race, and gender identities. Jesus explains how the powerful persecuted the *predominated*: 'if Doutor Oliveira who studied in Coimbra were to say, "Black thief..." that would pass from mouth to mouth. And that black man, without ever having stolen anything, was a thief. Because the *doutor* who had studied in Coimbra said so! And he would never be rehabilitated' (Jesus, 1997: 37, italics in the original).

The perception of the *Doutores* from Coimbra as uncalled-for enemies is disturbing, and it contradicts most definitions higher education offers about itself. It is safe to say no contemporary university would explicitly attack the *predominated*. Indeed, racialised, impoverished, illiterate rural women from the Global South are usually not even mentioned in mission statements or strategic plans, being at most placed as objects of study or targets of outreach activities. As Jesus shows, however, there is a direct relation between experiences of exclusion and the international system of higher education.

*Bitita's Diary* is a literary account of growing up and trying to make a living as a victim of structural inequality. In describing economic exploitation and pervasive state violence, Jesus highlights the role played by the *Doutores* from Coimbra in maintaining the status quo. As argued by Hilton Costa (2012, 2014), scientific racism became the primary ideological device to legitimise inequality after the Brazilian legal abolition of slavery in 1888. To 'overcome' the 'racial problem,' the state sought to make black (and indigenous) people 'improve,' 'progress,' and ultimately disappear by favouring and funding 'whitening policies' (*políticas de branqueamento*).

Government measures to increase white European immigration, and sponsor white settlement were evidence-based on racial science and eugenic codes developed in universities. Even though the skulls accumulated by physical anthropology in Coimbra and elsewhere are now shamefully hidden in basements or collecting dust in internal collections, contemporary academia is in no position to claim innocence in the perpetual reproduction of social inequality.

That which Jesus identifies as the origin of her own 'inferiority complex' is precisely what sustains academic prestige. Scholarly arrogance directly impacts the *predominated*, whose imposed identity as university-Other bears the social costs of exclusion from 'knowledge,' the bias of inferiority that thwarts full citizenship in the political sphere, and economic exploitation in menial/reproductive/care work that supposedly does not require 'skills' or credentials (hooks, 2013; Bagno 2015).

Decolonial critiques demonstrate the connection between the heroic narrative of science as a progressive accumulation of knowledge and the re-design of the European imperial project under secular terms (Segato, 1998; Lugones, 2010; Leyva

et al., 2018). The production of science as the realm of truth was not exclusively an epistemological mission: establishing and sustaining scientific hegemony has been deeply entangled with economic and political Western domination.

It is no accident that Jesus identifies the *Doutores* from Coimbra with Portugal. The Western identity that positions her as the Other is grounded on unmarked whiteness, distance from poverty, professional degrees, and national state citizenship (Kilomba, 2008). Jesus summarises the epistemological arrogance embedded in the academic project by asking, *‘Why do they hate us?’* To deepen this question, the next section historicises the concept of the ‘bottomless pyramid’ to later argue it can be a fruitful tool in critical appraisals of educational systems.

## 2. The bottomless pyramid

This section examines the genesis of the concept of ‘bottomless pyramid’ (*triángulo sin base*)<sup>2</sup> as grounded in Latin American debates about domination against indigenous populations. This was one of the academic projects to produce a theory empirically grounded in the continent’s reality, dislodging Euro-American precedence in the social sciences. The image of a bottomless pyramid (Figure 1) was used by Julio Cotler (1967) to describe the structure of domination sustaining power in the Peruvian national-context, resting on the marginalisation of the indigenous peasant majority. The pyramid is formed by interpersonal relationships between a dominant apex and several subordinated others. Because the power system undervalues the mutual relationships amongst the dominated, the resulting figure is that of multiple vertical bonds that converge on a single vertex, unconnected at the bottom, hence ‘bottomless.’



Figure 1: The bottomless pyramid  
Source: Cotler 1969: 65.

<sup>2</sup> A note on translation for *triángulo sin base*. I partially follow Brenda Baletti’s (2012) preference for *pyramid* instead of *triangle*, for it conveys the power inequality made visible by the concept. This option seems validated by Rivera Cusicanqui. When asked about her concept of *pirámides académicas sin base*, she does not rectify the expression, but embraces it. In the same 2013 interview for the Colombian magazine *Jicara* (republished in Rivera Cusicanqui 2015: 305), she further explains the idea was developed ‘many years ago’ by the Peruvian sociologist Julio Cotler. Furthermore, she mentions the inspiration of the novels of José María Arguedas. Differently from Baletti, however, I prefer the term *bottomless* to *baseless*, because it gives a sense of unfairness and hopelessness, as well as because of Bob Marley’s ‘Redemption Song’ (1979), which states: ‘Old pirates, yes, they rob I / Sold I to the merchant ships / Minutes after they took I / From the bottomless pit // But my hand was made strong / By the hand of the Almighty / We forward in this generation / Triumphantly (...) Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery / None but ourselves can free our minds / Have no fear for atomic energy / ‘Cause none of them can stop the time.’

Cotler borrowed the vertical lines from Foster (1963: 1280), whose research amongst peasants living ‘near the bottom of the Mexican socioeconomic pyramid’ helped explain asymmetrical relations of patronage. Foster’s empirical investigation identified that dissimilar goods and services were exchanged between unequal partners over time, functioning as gifts being traded without trying to strike a balance, which would cancel the long-term social exchanges (Mauss, 2003). The clientelist connections identified by Foster do not bind groups; instead, they give vigour to patronage systems, that is, networks of contractual ties that underly formal institutions.

In the Peruvian power relations investigated by Cotler and colleagues (Matos Mar et al., 1969), the dominant group (mainly composed of mestizos) controlled the land and the knowledge of Castellano, and thus mediated and manipulated the indigenous’ ties with the state and the market. Indigenous groups were prevented from participating in institutionalised politics, hindered in their autonomous initiatives, and forced to depend on mestizos’ mediation. They were found to live in a ‘permanent state of insecurity.’

As such, indigenous peasants were trapped into developing asymmetrical ties of reciprocity with the powerful, who, in turn, used the resulting personal loyalty to increase and legitimise their position (Cotler, 1967: 233). The dominant *patrón* interposed rewards and punishments, periodically alternating bribes and intimidation as part of the same power structure. ‘This is how an exchange of services is established between mestizos and indigenous people in which the former establishes the modality and measure of said reciprocity’ (Cotler, 1969: 64). In other words, the exchange terms that regulate the exchange rates are set by the apex – disregarding and undervaluing the input from the bottom.

The privatisation of power by the mestizos meant they did not need to consider the demands of the indigenous peasants. Appointments to influential positions systematically excluded indigenous peoples. They ensured, for instance, that illiterate and propertyless people were not allowed to vote. This dynamic strengthened state clientelism, a system of recruitment and promotion in the public administration based on recommendations by the powerful landowners at the local and national levels (Cotler, 1967: 238). Since the livelihood of bureaucrats depended on personal protection, state corruption was normalised as rewards and kickbacks.

Public employees consistently discriminated against indigenous sectors, not as a sign of mere personal prejudice but of social privilege. In other words, clientelism as a system reinforced colonial power structures and prevented political change. The stability of the power relations relied on a normative structure that legitimated the status quo while aiming at breeding impotence and fatalism amongst the dominated (Matos et al., 1969; Williams, 1969). This principle explains how social priorities diverge depending on someone’s position in the bottomless pyramid.

One of the main theoretical goals of the project to investigate domination in Latin America was to counter interpretations of indigenous peasants as ‘naturally’ inclined to apathy or subservience. Contrarily, it showed the psychological effects of colonialism as the source of those traits, dismantling racializing dogmas (Williams, 1969). In the bottomless pyramid structure, because chances for social mobility are individual and regulated by patronage, the *predominated* are expected to perceive their equals as potential rivals in competing for rewards and favours conferred by the dominator.

## 2.1 Arboreal internal colonialism

The bottomless pyramid can be used to explain the functioning of ‘internal colonialism’, that is the intra-national dimensions of remaining international colonialisms (Casanova, 2006; Bringel and Leoni, 2021). It reveals the internal tentacles of external structures of domination and describes the ‘colonialist continuum’ organising social relations between elites and indigenous populations in former colonies. The monopolisation of resources, the unequal life standards, and the violent, repressive systems are explained as part of a structure of domination between distinctive populational groups (Casanova, 2006). The intra-national colonial relationship implies ethnic discrimination, political dependence, social inferiority, residential segregation, and juridical incapacity (Stavenhagen, 2013; Promes, 2011).

In this model, economic and social ‘development’ is a relational outcome arising from a ‘pumping mechanism’ (Stavenhagen, 2013) that draws resources to specific centres, under-developing other populations and managing conflict through staggered scales of exclusion. Articulated with class, the specificity of intra-colonial relations is that they organise domination between distinct groups, that is, the exploitation of one population by another (Promes, 2011). In this sense, it entails economic, social, political, and cultural *cleavages* that exclude whole groups from power (Cotler, 1967: 244).

Indeed, the notion of cleavages was incorporated into the concept itself. The bottomless pyramid was further developed as an arboreal (or tree-like) system linking different layers of power (Alberti and Fuenzalida, 1969). The arboreal shape (Figure 2) illustrated how the central apex concentrates decision-making capacity, controls information, and monopolises external communications. This means that news or knowledge emitted by an inferior echelon cannot move horizontally. Any message has to travel the whole way up to the apex and back down to the bottom. Knowledge diffusion thus may be paralysed by the apex, which performs as a compulsory filter in the circulation of information, silencing dissent.

*Public Transcript as Performance*

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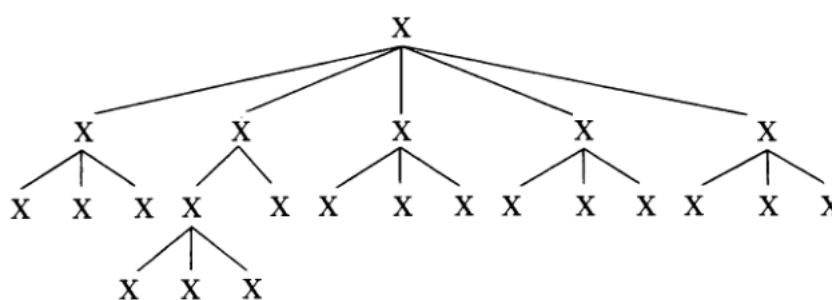


Figure 2: Arboreal shape of the bottomless pyramid with several power layers  
 Source: Scott 1990: 62.

In summary, the bottomless pyramid is an analytical instrument to understand domination, whereby only the wishes of the apex are considered in implementing the nature of social relations (Alberti and Fuenzalida, 1969). It depicts the unequal exchange between the social apex that monopolises resources and a dispossessed and disjointed base. The contrasting ideal type is a social system with a broad,

integrated base that generates participatory and consensual social ties based on strong horizontal links.

## 2.2 Connecting the base: a model for change

The bottomless pyramid is, more than anything, a model to analyse social change (Altamirano, 2019; Cueto, 2011). It explains how transformation in closed systems of domination largely depends on external influences to challenge the monopoly of the apex, create alternative connections within the base, and generate a crisis of authority. Cotler identifies two types of change in systems of domination functioning as bottomless pyramids: one related to the ‘exchange rates’ and the other the ‘exchange terms’ (1969: 72). Although the first type may successfully increase income or reduce work in favour of the *predominated*, the second one has the potential to significantly alter social relations for it relies on the initiative of subordinated groups to dismantle the bottomless pyramid and collectively redistribute the resources.

One power dynamic this differentiation of types of change makes visible, is that privileges can be expanded by incorporating segments of the population into the system, extending the sectors benefiting from peasant/indigenous marginality without changing the pyramidal structure. This process neutralises dissent by promoting specific groups, isolating them from the marginal sectors, and reinforcing the maintenance of the system of power. In other words, ‘incremental reforms allow for the inclusion of new groups in the dominant economic system, [and] the system of domination actually expands as it alienates the upwardly mobile groups from the marginal sectors’ (Promes, 2011: 9). Cotler names this process ‘segmentarian incorporation’.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, structural change responds to the demand for ‘full participation of the different sectors of the population in the distribution of social resources’ (Cotler, 1967: 244). This kind of change is accomplished by strengthening horizontal relations capable of challenging the control of the vertical lines in the pyramid. The base becomes connected through solidarity links that break the monopoly of the apex concerning internal and external bonds (Figure 3).

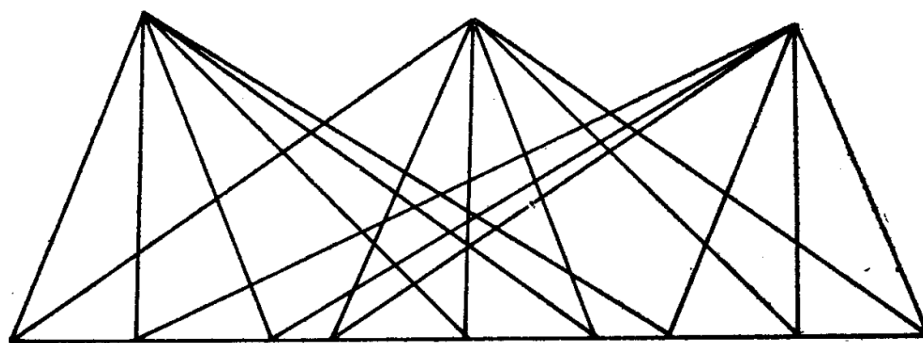


Figure 3: Disintegration of the traditional system of domination  
Source: Cotler 1969: 73.

<sup>3</sup> This can be fruitfully related to Crenshaw’s intersectional metaphor of antidiscrimination laws as offering a ‘hatch’ in the basement ceiling that benefit those who are able to ‘crawl through’ (Crenshaw 1989, Carastathis 2013).

In this changed structure, the authority of the apex is disrupted. Decision-making processes begin to require the mutual accommodation of divergent aspirations since the groups at the bottom of the pyramid are able to express themselves to create favourable exchange terms. The power shifts from negotiating favourable exchange rates to re-negotiating the exchange itself (Alberti and Fuenzalida, 1969; Cotler, 1969: 73).

For the ‘complicated situation of crisis’ we are in, when even dissidence has become a ‘branded garment’ (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018: 74, translation by the author), guidance to differentiate between segmentarian incorporation and structural change is specially warranted. It allows us to recognise the partial dislodging of power while avoiding grasping for crumbs of recognition that fail to redistribute collective resources.

Simultaneously, it is important to draw attention to the limitations of the concept. In theoretical debates, there is constantly a risk in ‘fetishising’ concepts (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018), since ‘categories are quick to congeal’ (Lugones and Spelman, 1983: 579). In describing the functioning of individualised connections between an apex and the base, the bottomless pyramid is liable to emphasise the impotence generated by domination. This could enhance instead of dislodge the fatalism it identifies. In other words, by demonstrating the shape and functioning of the structure, the idea of a bottomless pyramid risks naturalising unequal power relations.<sup>4</sup>

The bottomless pyramid, thus, can only be useful as a device to revitalise critical stands. To do so, it is important to bear in mind the significance of changes in Latin American contexts since the 1960s, both in terms of politics and theoretical approaches. One dimension of the Latin American social though is precisely to displace the taken for grantedness of individualising conceptions of humanity, thus tensioning several assumptions of social sciences and human rights discourses.

### 2.3 Missing links: the hidden transcripts

Although this review does not thoroughly assess the circulation of the bottomless pyramid in different intellectual debates, it might be worth highlighting some missing links in the history of ideas. One has to do with the influential concepts of ‘infra politics’ and ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott, 1990). In *Domination and the arts of resistance*, Scott (1990: 61) loosely refers to the ‘ubiquitous patron-client structures of leadership described by anthropologists’ and includes an accompanying figure depicting the ‘typical diagram of patron-client relation’ (reproduced here as Figure 2 above). Even though he does not offer any references, it is fair to assume the ‘network of dyadic (two-person) reciprocities always articulated vertically’ (Scott 1990: 61) that he alludes to is precisely the bottomless pyramid since it describes the exchange of goods and services, implying paternalism on one side and service on the other.

Interestingly, it is mainly against the assumption that ‘there are no horizontal links among the subordinates’ that Scott builds the notion of ‘infra politics’, aiming to highlight the circulation of the ‘hidden transcripts’ as a form of counter-hegemonic knowledge. His description of the arts of resistance has been widely read, influencing both decolonial feminism (Lugones, 2010) and higher education studies (Hedges, 2021). For instance, Scott’s concept of infra politics is prominent

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<sup>4</sup> I thank the anonymous reviewer(s) for highlighting the need to think about the limits of the bottomless pyramid.



in Lugones' work (Lara, 2000). She employs it to define the inward turn of oppressed communities, which makes it possible to organise against the powerful.

However, Scott's use of the 'hidden transcript' is not restricted to oppressed groups. He also describes the existence of the 'hidden transcript of the powerful' (2010: 16), which differs from the public transcript shared with subordinated groups. This 'hidden transcript of the powerful' seems closer to the use made by Morley (2006), who employs the term to describe the micropolitics of gender in higher education. Although Morley does not reference Scott, the allusion to the 'frequently hidden transcripts of discrimination even in the policy-contexts most committed to gender equity' may be assumed to have some connection to his theory, even if mediated by the idea of 'hidden curriculum'. Morley's work, in turn, inspires descriptions of hidden power in higher education (Hodgins, 2021: Hodgins and O'Connor, 2021).

For the purposes of this discussion, it is worth emphasising Scott's careless use of intellectual legacies, referring to unnamed 'anthropologists' and neglecting to assert his sources. If our reading is correct, and he drew upon Latin American intellectual work, this seems like a striking example of the unequal systems of exchange in higher education that will be further considered in the next section.

### 3. The bottomless academic pyramid

I first encountered the idea of bottomless pyramid in Rivera Cusicanqui's book *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: a reflection on the practices and discourses of decolonization* (2015 [2010]). In it, she depicts the links in the international system of higher education as 'bottomless pyramids that vertically bind certain Latin American universities—and form clientelist networks with indigenous and black intellectuals' (2015: 97). This portrayal denounces the absence of horizontal connections between universities in the Global South, whose subordinate position constrains them to 'look up' to the dominant institutions in the Global North. Such thwarted attention obstructs horizontal connections and helps maintain the hierarchical structure which benefits a few institutions that concentrate symbolic capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2014).

Cusicanqui explains that the asymmetrical distribution of visibility feeds into the academic and publishing machinery, adding exchange value through the manufacture of mainstream theory. 'Groundbreaking' theory flows from the Global North to the South, while intellectual 'raw materials' flow in the opposite direction. The imperative to search for knowledge in written form, in scholarly literature produced in specific languages and published in exceptionally high index (often for-profit) journals, reproduce neo-colonial flows (Bell and Mills, 2020). As such, the higher education system sustains its internal prestige economy, distributing legitimacy and resources in a rigid hierarchical structure.

This constitutes a self-perpetuating circuit since universities reinforce the pyramid's existence by struggling to be on the top. In the international competition for status and resources, universities are ranked (in English) according to well-established geographies of 'progress' (Stack, 2016). 'Top-level' or 'world-universities' are thus technologies to restrict and control the meaning of knowledge, preserving the status quo and alienating alternative genealogies of learning (Zapata Silva, 2018; Leyva and Speed, 2018).

As several decolonial critiques have demonstrated, science is founded on the exclusion and devaluation of its Others: common sense, superstition, myth, traditional knowledge, belief, and culture (Meneses et al., 2004). It consigns whole populations to ignorance as if the absence of a scientific layout signalled the absence of knowledge itself. Defining alterity by lack is an old colonial trick grounded on

ethnocentrism (*Sem Fé, sem Lei e sem Rei*). Fatefully, the erasure of non-Western knowledge, by depreciating what is deemed non-scientific, has been labelled ‘epistemicide’ by a *Doutor* from Coimbra (Santos, 2018), whose career has recently been exposed as hiding long-term moral and sexual harassment (Viaene et al., 2023; Paixão, 2023).

Universities forge and sustain alliances with states and business interests to maintain their position as the rightful container of knowledge. They self-ascribe to the legitimate institutions to bestow legitimacy. That is also why universities’ frontiers are so well guarded (both by regulating who can be admitted and producing knowledge that is unreachable to the non-initiated): this prevents the *predominated* from accessing academic materials, let alone responding to it.

More than just disavowing other epistemological systems, however, scientific endeavours have accumulated knowledge by dispossession, constantly rebranding the expertise of non-Western peoples with Latin terms, disciplinary jargon, maps, patents, and other pseudo-universalising methodologies. Indeed, part of the power of academic discourse lies in its proclaimed objectivity – that feminists, antiracists, decolonial and queer theories unmask as an epistemological fraud – supposedly capable of producing ‘universal’ knowledge.

These relations can be classified as extractivist since they are grounded on ‘self-reinforcing practices, mentalities, and power differentials underwriting and rationalizing socio-ecologically destructive modes of organizing life through subjugation, violence, depletion, and non-reciprocity’ (Chagnon et al., 2022: 760). Indeed, Rivera Cusicanqui (2018: 25) mentions ‘symbolic extractivism’. She employs the concept of the bottomless pyramid to disrupt the structures sustaining some places as ‘centres’ – allegedly deserving and certainly receiving more attention than ‘the rest’. Centres, tops or apexes are technologies to restrict and control (enclosure) the meaning of knowledge, and they capture the possibility of ‘progress’ and preserve the status quo. Since horizontal links could weaken the domination of the ‘top’, disconnection amongst the *predominated* is also one of the traits in regulating power and communication inside institutions.

Denouncing the international system of higher education and criticising the self-absorbed power struggles within academia, Rivera Cusicanqui consciously antagonises the ‘Five-star doctors’ – the non-Portuguese speaking versions of the *Doutores* from Coimbra. She mistrusts their way of doing ‘knowledge’ dissociated from doing living: a breach between discourse and practice that is the hallmark of colonial knowledge.

### 3.1 The political economy of knowledge

Investigating the post-colonial fad in US academia, Rivera Cusicanqui shows how the vertical structure of the bottomless pyramid draws ideas from the South to the North, where they are stripped of their political urgency and converted into raw material for theory. As such, ideas are rebranded and boosted by neologisms, gaining academic dividends while becoming detached from their sources. They are appropriated as resources (Cotera, 2018; Curiel, 2020). Their value depends on the potential profitability in the market of theories, itself ruled by clique disputes, corporative interests, and the compulsion for the ‘new’ (Cusicanqui, 2015).

Even though continuously disrupted, such an epistemological apparatus is one gear in reproducing inequality, and it demands our attention to construct less exploitative ways of occupying academia. Approaching ‘higher’ education without considering its intrinsic links to Imperialism is to collaborate with the discursive hoax that reproduces the scientific claim to truth and power. In their extractivist

relations with the ‘bottom,’ universities from the Global North ignore or discard the deepness of context where specific concepts were formulated, increasing abstraction levels while deepening alienation. Instead of being used to enhance change and strengthen insurgent social forces, extracted ideas are converted into products to enhance academic careers.

This process is described by Rivera Cusicanqui as the ‘political economy of knowledge’, organising the promotion opportunities and the ability to hire and distribute fellowships that, in turn, create international relationships of patronage. I argue that this criticism, that she aimed directly at intellectuals who are part of the Latin American Decolonial Studies group, or the Modernity/Coloniality Group, can be replicated to other academic connections: ‘Through the game of who cites whom, hierarchies are structured, and we end up having to consume, in a regurgitated form, the very ideas regarding decolonization that we indigenous people and intellectuals of Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador have produced independently’ (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012: 103).

Zapata Silva (2018: 65) echoes this by stating that ‘the “geopolitics of knowledge” of anticolonial label is a concept that does not revert to practice, and actually contradicts itself by re-colonising gestures in the imaginary and minds of intellectuals in the South’. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the shape of internal colonialism reproducing gender and racial inequalities in academia is arboreal, that is, composed of ‘centres and subcenters, nodes and subnodes, which connect certain universities, disciplinary trends, and academic fashions of the North with their counterparts in the South’ (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012: 101). Instead of accepting the tautologically self-evident relevance of given authors or debates based on their ‘impact’ or publication indexes, Rivera Cusicanqui politicises the literature review. Scientific methodology, dictating how we propose questions and where we look for answers, is entangled with the expropriation of knowledge and the reproduction of inequality. She calls for awareness of the ‘game of who cites whom,’ analogous to the debate on ‘citational policy’ by Sara Ahmed (2017).

*The problem with intellectual colonialism is that we only know the trajectory of anticolonial thought in fellow [Abya Yala] countries, through Yankee or European academia, and what is worse, we hardly read each other.* (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018: 28, footnote, translation by the author)

The continuity of the bottomless system relies on the complicity of co-opted national academic elites (Curiel, 2020). Rivera Cusicanqui raises a warning about the ‘rhetorical abilities of the elites and their enormous flexibility for making over collective guilt and turning it into a matrix of domination that thus renews its colonial dimension’ (cited in Gago, 2016: 3). She deplors the opportunist repurposing of the Bolivian state as superficially ‘multicultural’, warning that merely discursive shifts do not change practices. Decolonisation requires instead to ‘defeat those who are determined to preserve the past, with its burden of ill-gotten privileges’ (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012: 96). This involves accessing the economic strategies and material mechanisms operating behind the discourses and overcoming ‘false inclusions’. As a form of segmentarian incorporation, false inclusions maintain essentialist identities, produce ornamental and symbolic recognition, and re-accommodate structures of exploitation.

Rivera Cusicanqui asserts the epistemological status of indigenous collective knowledge and challenges the naturalised frontiers in academic texts that place ‘ethnographic data’ (findings) separated from ‘theory’ (literature review). She suggests knowledge autonomy can be constructed through South-South links that break the bottomless pyramid. She advises that it is our responsibility not to

contribute to the reproduction of domination and that decolonisation is a collective task. Coherently, she relies on Aymara epistemologies to dislodge the vision of linear history, affirming ‘the regression or progression, the repetition or overcoming of the past is at play in each conjuncture and is dependent more on our acts than on our words’ (2012: 96). Thus, to challenge narratives of change based on evolutive ethnocentric preconditions, we ought to identify the assumptions implicit in academic knowledge projects, one of them being the idea of progress. Indeed, I argue next that progress is one of the devices sustaining the bottomless pyramid.

### 3.2 A criticism of ‘progress’ by feminist decolonial perspectives

*¿Hasta dónde vamos a conceder a la ideología del progreso todas las mentiras empaquetadas con las que nos ha envuelto durante tantos años? [How far are we going to concede to the ideology of progress all the packaged lies with which it has enveloped us for so many years?]* (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018: 51, translation by the author).

Arguably every educational project is shaped by the missionary will to reorganise ‘the world’. That is one reason educational discourse is so pervasively normative: it consistently proposes how things *should* be in the future by disavowing how they are. That is why it is indispensable to challenge the dogma of ‘progress’ and academic knowledge assumptions. In this sense, we join efforts of several feminists working within a decolonial frame who have been questioning epistemological colonialism, one of the foundational pillars structuring the meaning of ‘progress’ itself.

The fraudulent perception of formal education as always beneficial and positive is based on a pedagogical promise that has equality as its core aim. As discussed by Jacques Rancière (1991), - inspired by the work of Joseph Jocotot, the underlying logic assigns as the primary pedagogical task the reduction of social inequality, and it remains arguably uncontested. It feels troublesome to position oneself against such a project because it would mean contesting the principle of equality itself.

However, when established as a future goal and not a present fact, equality is engulfed and transformed by the promise of ‘progress’. The pedagogical apparatus perpetually recreates inequality by claiming to eradicate it as a future goal (Rancière, 1991). A different pedagogical principle would start by ‘recognising the equality of intelligence and propel each person’s autonomous capacity to learn’ (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018: 41, translation by the author). As we remain attached to an idea of future improvement, this equality of intelligence is denied.

‘Progress’ as a worldview surreptitiously organises space through time by imposing a unified timeline onto ‘humanity’ in which the Western experience is sanctioned as the contemporary prototype. The ideology of ‘progress’ is so embedded in discursive normality that implying *the* past refers to a homogeneous history common to all humanity is perfectly acceptable. The use of ‘past’ in singular form presumes that there is a unitary timeline capable of encompassing the whole of the human experience. It implies that the Renaissance, the French and Industrial Revolutions were the historical precedents to the contemporary organisation of all societies (Bhambra, 2007) – as if nothing happened ‘elsewhere’. Differently, Rivera Cusicanqui (2018: 77) urges us to acknowledge the multiple and heterogeneous temporal constellations that shape the present, becoming aware of the ‘apparently chaotic juxtaposition of traces or remains of diverse pasts’.

Discussing coloniality, María Lugones (2010) argues that colonial ‘progress’ is grounded on the colonisation of memory. Projected in space and inscribed in bodies, the organisation of human diversity in an evolutive time scale is a racializing venture legitimising colonial expansion and labour exploitation. This is a profoundly

gendered project since tradition, ignorance, and the concept of ‘instinct’ are portrayed as quintessential feminine traits by biased biopolitics (McClintock; 1995; Cumes et al. 2018; Kempf, 2022). Some places and peoples are classified as *the now* in contrast to those who have not yet made it – denying coequality (Fabian, 1983). The foothold to such stratagem has been argued to represent a widescale obliviousness stemming from colonial ignorance and alleged superiority (Sullivan, 2007).

The gear of academic ‘progress’ demobilises subversive potentialities by detaching ideas from their context in the manufacture of ‘discourses of competency’ (Chauí, 2017). ‘Progress’ requires constantly reinventing the contemporary as the domain of the ‘new’ so that whoever deploys it can self-describe as the most advanced in a perpetual race for novelty that sustains and creates hierarchies. Not just anybody, however, is entitled to produce innovation, as ‘progress’-positions are strictly distributed amongst those who can brand and, therefore, appropriate innovation (Kolodny, 2018). Indeed, the fixed colonial standpoint at pyramid apexes establishes which ‘other’ locations can be distanced from and considered ‘the most backward’, or, as the saying goes, ‘in the middle of nowhere’. Deploying a geographical imaginary, it projects ‘centres’ or ‘capitals’ where meaningful events and developments (*innovation*) happen, destined to be trickled down to ‘remote’ places where ‘progress’ needs to be brought from the outside.

The ideology of ‘progress’ forges *one* history to project *one* future because all societies shall ‘advance’ to the Western’s level of ‘development’ at some point – except that whenever they did, they’d be already inescapably behind schedule because the clock is quite literally set by the West. ‘Progress’ provides a comforting reassurance that we can identify the ‘direction’ a given society is taking as if ‘society’ was not itself a product of the same cosmology that engendered ‘progress’ (Durkheim, 2007). Like ‘culture,’ the idea of society contains and homogenises scattered events and circumstances under a politically manageable, interpretative and encompassing keyword. It creates a conceptualization of ‘us’ where the present is held, and according to this conceptualization, disputes can be expressed in terms of evolution. This is done by attaching the diversity of human existence to a single unified denominator, the apex of the pyramid, that aims to control the flux of information.

### 3.3 De-progressing the everyday

Inspired by decolonial feminisms understanding, I began listening to the way people around me employ progress frames as taken for granted. Indeed, most discourse around social transformation is saturated by this rhetoric of ‘progress’. It is inscribed in the pervasive use of temporal prefixes and adverbs like *still, yet, once, already,* and *until,* as well as in the employment of verbs based on bodies’ movements that project evolutive timelines (to *step ahead,* to *reach,* to move *back* or *forward,* to *advance,* to *stagnate*). Decolonial feminism urges us to acknowledge such implicit temporalizing devices because they teach us the role of discourse in controlling interpretations and expectations of change (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018: 22).

It seems fair to argue that progress as a discursive device is what prompts outraged people engaged in political debates to recurrently draw odious examples from *the past* (such as the Medieval times or the Nazi rule) aiming at denouncing what is considered unacceptable in present experiences – or at least unacceptable *here*. The assumption that drives public discourse of *now* (e.g. phrases such as ‘This is 2021!’ or ‘This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century!’ that criticise a current event) is that some things should have been surpassed because ‘we’ progressed. The imposed homogenisation

of societal vectors, implicit in the ideology of ‘progress’, leads to far-reaching consequences. For one, it makes it very challenging to consider the contradictory simultaneity of changes in contemporary gender relations – changes that are at once shaped by progressive forecasts and obscured by the same progress-saturated ethos (Abu-Lughod, 2012).

The imaginary of ‘progress’ inspires scientific epistemology in which ‘past’ knowledge is expected to be incorporated and surpassed in our search for the truth supposedly reachable by accumulation. This does not appropriately account for the ways some concepts or theoretical contributions (such as the efforts around defining the bottomless pyramid) are either effaced or subsumed in the discontinuous history of the social sciences. Rivera Cusicanqui, for one, highlights the ‘non-linearity of history, the non-progressive character of its course, and the fact that both forgetting and remembering are selective and interweave in contextualised and diverse ways in the present’ (2018: 132, translated by the author).

Regardless, advancement and originality are viewed as an obligation in the current competition for visibility. There seems to be special dividends in claiming to have been ‘the first’ to do something, effacing the very process of making this something possible. ‘Progress’ is inscribed on the foundation of scientific research. Thus, the evolutive expectation partially forges the academic compulsion for the ‘new’. The obsession with innovation seems to be the rationale grounding most research efforts, constrained to sustain their worth by claiming to hold the quality of ‘never-existed-before’ (or never-investigated – the important step in any research proposal highlighting the ‘lack in literature’).

The higher education system is designed to sustain its internal prestige economy, distributing legitimacy and resources in rigid gendered hierarchical structures (Coate and Howson, 2014). For decolonial feminism, schooling itself can be read an institutional embodiment of the ideology of ‘progress’. It standardises and normalises a linear timeline through which a yearly ladder from first to second and third grade is ‘climbed up’ followed by order of ‘primary school’ to ‘secondary’ and then onto ‘higher’ education. The longer a person climbs the ladder towards the apex of the pyramid, the more s/he is advanced, enlightened, knowledgeable, respectful, distinguished, impactful, creative, entitled to an opinion, and deserving of a higher income. A common expression sums up the rule: ‘study, to become someone in life’ – at once reducing education to schooling and non-educated people to no one.

Under the sign of ‘progress’, thus, equality is effaced, for it is permanently postponed. ‘Public Instruction is the secular arm of ‘progress’, the way to equalize inequality progressively, that is to say, to unequalize equality indefinitely. Everything is still played out according to a sole principle, the inequality of intelligence’ (Rancière, 1991: 131). Equality does not require public instruction to ‘advance’ ‘common people’. It requires the verification of the equality of intelligence as a fact (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018).

The distance the school system claims to reduce is the one that grounds its existence. It installs and is installed by symbolic power, creates inferiority complex, encloses knowledge, and conserves inequality while promising equality as a carrot in the future. To assert its worth, ‘higher’ education systematically devalues what lies outside its borders, as Jesus (1997) denounced, while simultaneously self-servingly engulfing what can be profitable. This is sustained by the enclosure of knowledge and the control of the information channels. Although such control is bound to fail, its power sustains inequalities.

#### **4. Contributions of the bottomless academic pyramid to the sociology of education**

The bottomless academic pyramid can be a fruitful tool to contemporary debates on higher education. I had the opportunity to employ it when researching gender equality initiatives in an Irish university (Ruggi, 2023). The aim of my project was to investigate how aspirations for equality could be materialised into an institutional agenda. This led me to review the history of local activism and its contribution to feminist theorising. The bottomless pyramid hermeneutics helped me understand how feminist academics working in Ireland had, at least since the 1970s, made efforts to denounce the exploitation of their work and to counter the several silencing mechanisms that prevented them from voicing dissatisfaction. They built an epistemic community within the ‘bottom’ of academic power that synthesized several concepts capable of describing and criticising gender inequality. These efforts, shared by networks of solidarity, culminated in legal cases by women academics proving discrimination on the grounds of gender, thus leveraging pressure from external entities, including the media, to change universities. Around 2016, the national higher education policy began prioritising gender equality (O’Connor and Irvine, 2020).

A core critical concept circulating in feminist scholarship and in the hidden transcripts accessed through ethnography was that of care work (Lynch, 2010, O’Keefe and Courtois, 2019). The analysis of the allocation of devalued care work between academics (like teaching in comparison to high-profile research) demonstrated that the prestige economy was detrimental to women scholars, resulting in hindered promotional opportunities (Coate and Howson, 2014). Departing from this feminist understanding, I coupled the concept of care to that of bottomless pyramid and was able to make visible the systematic extractivism of care work. Although the university depends on this work, the power structure sets the rates of exchange to ensure people who perform care do not access decision-making positions, being exposed to precarity and exploitation. Occupying the apex, senior management controls the terms of exchange and the flux of information to silence dissent and breed fatalism. The bottomless pyramid guided me to connect intra-institutional politics with the international system of higher education that partially sustains the hierarchisation of academic tasks. In this sense, the concept aided me in politicising the everyday and to focus on work patterns more than on discursive turns.

Because the bottomless pyramid attempts to describe the mechanisms reproducing power structures, challenging the naturalisation of differences between populations, I was able to decouple ‘care work’ from ‘women’s work’. This move was important, because change in power relations had incorporated (although in segmentarian ways) groups of academic women to the ongoing power structure. In this process, the very notion of ‘gender equality’ was captured by the policy apparatus and narrowed to a slim definition, according to which the problem of gender inequality became solely the lack of women in senior academic and management positions (Ruggi and Duvvury, 2023). Using the understanding of power cleavages, and the arboreal shape of the bottomless pyramid, I challenged the narrowing of the definition of ‘university’ to the work done by academics and foregrounded the structural extraction of care towards the apex, highlighting that care work includes cleaning, catering, gardening, and administering. Such an expansion of the inquiry meant my research could transition from a binary gender-approach to an intersectional one, looking into how ethnicity, nationality, and disability interacted within power dynamics.

This research experience led me to believe that the bottomless pyramid has the potential to become an organising concept (Chagnon et al., 2022) in the sociology of education. Its affordances help us position empirically located research within a broader frame of reference. The arboreal shape allows us to identify the different functionings of power within each cleavage and to ask how the superimposed levels interact with each other, acknowledging that the middle layers may benefit from the exploitation of the *predominated*. Moreover, a feminist decolonial reading of the academic pyramid offers us a strong methodological mandate to co-theorise the knowledges circulating at the bottom, since they have the potential to criticise the structure.

The bottomless pyramid may help us articulate classics of sociology of education, mostly interested in class inequities (Althusser, 1970, Bourdieu and Passeron, 2014) with debates on race (Gomes, 2003), gender (O'Connor, 2014, Pereira 2017, Lund 2020), disability (Pereira, 2019) and international inequality (Khoo, 2012). It may help us approach the issue of how precarious work breeds exploitation in neoliberal academia (Ivancheva, 2015; Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015) without assuming all universities around the world are bound to the same destiny. In other words, the bottomless pyramid has the potential to provide a frame for decolonial feminisms to develop an international research agenda committed to transforming formal education while avoiding the risk of denying the 'equality of intelligence' (Rancière, 1991; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018).

#### 4.1 Final remarks

Carolina Maria de Jesus was acutely aware of schooling as a dividing practice, teaching arrogance through the veneer of meritocracy. She wrote, for instance: '[T]he *doutores* from Coimbra said that it was the children of the ruling class who should study, and not those who should be ruled, that the master and the servant could not have equal wisdom' (Jesus, 1997: 37, also page 98). She envied and desired her neighbour Lina's prestige. Simultaneously, Jesus believed in the promise upheld by Rui Barbosa, Mr Manoel Nogueira, and her grandfather that 'when the blacks learned how to read, they would know how to defend themselves. They won't humbly accept the yoke' (Jesus, 1997: 46; also Mirza, 2008).

This expectation seems to have shaped her life. Not allowed to study for more than two years, Jesus became a committed autodidact seeking and producing meaning in written materials while picking discarded cardboard, metal, and wood from the streets of São Paulo to scarcely feed herself and her three kids. She dared to occupy a subject position that was never meant for her, the one of a knowledgeable unapologetic writer. Her first book, *Quarto de Despejo: diário de uma favelada* [*Child of the Darkness*] was published in 1960 and became a best-seller translated to thirteen languages. Despite this success, her professional, intellectual, and aesthetic project was denied. She was ostracised from public spaces, and she was obstructed when seeking to circulate her later works (Barboza da Silva e Ruggi, 2023).

For several decades, Jesus was marginalised in Brazilian literature; she was largely forgotten in the national canon and excluded from the official curriculum. The memory and celebration of her work were almost exclusively cultivated by Black activists. She generally circulated in photocopies and scanned PDFs exchanged in networks of solidarity and friendship<sup>5</sup>, in what was later described as the

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<sup>5</sup> As such, I thank Rosimeire Barbosa da Silva who introduced me to Carolina Maria de Jesus.



‘undercommons’ (Moten and Harney, 2004). This has been transformed in the last decades and Jesus’ work is now being republished and widely studied.

In 2021, the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro offered Carolina Maria de Jesus an honorary degree as a doctor (Coutinho, 2021). Such an academic distinction is part of a broader impulse of recognition that is slowly gaining pace in Brazil and may help strengthen projects for endogenous education (Walsh and Khoo, 2016). To do so, however, we ought to avoid ‘genialising’ Jesus, for the cult of personality risks effacing the collective space that shaped her subjectivity. In this sense, it seems important to identify Jesus’ interlocutors. Benedito José da Silva, Rui Barbosa, Isolina and the *Doutores* from Coimbra are all part of her intellectual horizon. In such (necessarily partial) readings, we can glimpse the many-fold constellations of knowledge co-existing in their own right despite the effort made to regulate, censor and claim ownership of knowledge. Moreover, instead of assuming a self-congratulatory posture and celebrating Brazilian ‘progress’, we ought to remember Dr. Bitita was only allowed to exist postmortem. This doctorship is not more important than the need to acknowledge and support the several Bititas who are alive, and whose intelligence and intellectual contribution are legitimate with or without a degree.

To conclude this essay, I draw attention to a couple of implications of the bottomless academic pyramid in terms of how to practice feminist decolonial work from within academia. There are three dimensions that stand out for me as crucial. First, to let go of the striving for the production of ‘new knowledge’ and for the competition for visibility; second, to invest time and effort in the strengthening of horizontal relationships, weakening the bond with the pyramid-apex; and third, to legitimate the proliferation of learning spaces as epistemic communities, something that has a very direct impact in classroom relations. This way we may be able to reenergize ‘zones of friction’ (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018: 84) in our everyday practices, from within the relations we cultivate.

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